

I N D I A



The Splendour of Indian Silk

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berry tree in hollow bamboo canes. Another legend favours a Chinese princess who hid the precious cargo in her elaborately coiffeured hair when she came as a bride to wed an Indian prince.

However that may be, there can be little doubt that the cultivation of mulberry silk was probably imported into India from China, though well before then, indigenous wild silks were being spun in the remote forest regions of Assam and the northeast and woven on primitive bamboo loin-looms almost exactly as they are today.



The Brocades of Benaras

Benaras or Varanasi, situated in the heart of the Indo-Gangetic plain, is India's oldest living city, its most sacred pilgrimage site, and a famous centre for the finest silks and brocades. The kinkhab or cloth-of-gold of Benaras is legendary. True kinkhab is a glittering weave of gold and silver threads sometimes enlivened with jewel-coloured motifs in silk. Pure silk brocade with a touch of gold is called bafta, and the finely woven brocade of variegated silks is the Amru.

Benaras brocade saris with their delicately woven motifs of flowers and leaves, scrolls and bands, birds and animals scattered on a soft-coloured ground and enriched with intricate borders and richly ornamented pallaus, take pride of place in every Indian bride's trousseau. The master weavers of Benaras also specialize in fine, gauzy silver and gold tissues that are extraordinarily light and delicate.

The tradition of brocade weaving also flourishes in the great weaving centres of Ahmedabad and Surat in Gujarat, and in Thanjavur in the South. Not surprisingly, each region has produced its own typical motifs and designs and its own distinctive weaving technique.

The Three Choi

Three Parsi brothers called Choi who learned the craft in China, came back to Surat and introduced the tanchoi brocade, which was named after them. Tan (meaning three in Gujarati) Choi. The tanchoi brocade is usually in a dark satin weave, purple or dark red in ground colour

and embellished with motifs of flowers and birds and creepers in an all-over design. The Chinese influence is very evident, especially in the early examples of the brocade.

The Baluchar of Bengal

The weavers of Murshidabad, under royal patronage, interpreted the brocade weaving tradition in their own unique way. They wove silk brocaded saris called baluchar in deep, rich colours with superbly woven borders and pallaus. Often, as many as seventeen different coloured silks were used in the weaving of the fabric. The ground was scattered with butis (sprigs) and the pallau was a riot of riders on horses, parrots and peacocks, dancing girls and flowers, and even figures in European dress in some 19th century samples.

A cotton and silk brocade called Himru, once woven in Varanasi, Ahmedabad, Surat and the south, has now become the speciality of the weavers of Aurangabad. It is woven in a wide range of colours and designs and is much in demand as light shawls and stoles, makes excellent furnishing material and can also be made up into attractive winter fashions.

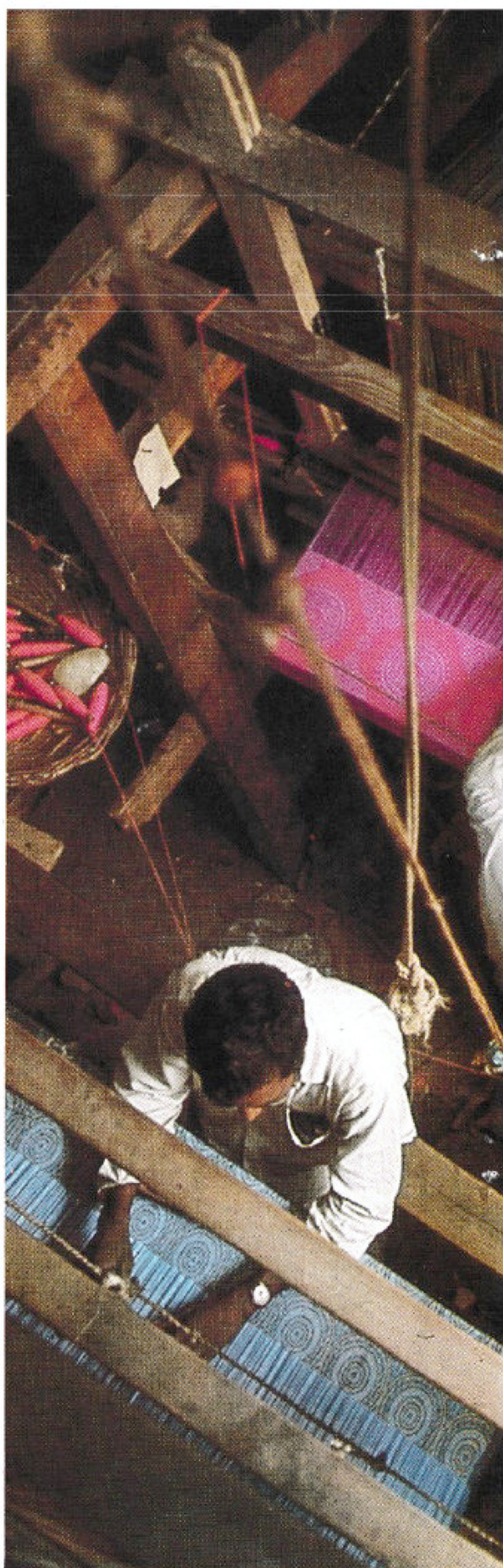
The Magic of Tie-and-Dye

The resist-dying technique has been practised by Indian craftsmen with great skill and originality for many centuries. There are two distinct traditions: the patola or ikat technique involves the dying of the tie-resist yarn before the weaving process begins. The bandhej or bandhni method is the tie-resist pattern-





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ing on a finely woven fabric.

The Festive Weave of Gujarat

No example of the tie-and-dye technique can match the beauty, subtlety and precision of the Gujarat patola. Silk yarn, both for the warp and the weft, is dyed the tie-resist method in a range of five or six traditional colours: Indian red, indigo blue, emerald green, black and yellow. This is an exact and highly skilled process which ensures that when the fabric is woven, the design will mesh precisely and create a magnificently coloured and figured ground of great richness and beauty with repeats of birds, flowers, animals and dancers in geometrically stylized perfection.

There was a time when patolas were woven in many centres in Gujarat. Today, only a few traditional weavers belonging to the Salvi families carry on this superb craft in Patan in Gujarat. Patolas are festive garments, worn on auspicious occasions like weddings. Their rarity, craftsmanship and cost has put them in the heirloom category and a patola sari or odhni (veil) is handed down from mother to daughter, generation to generation.

The Ikats of Orissa

The tie-and-dye weaves of Orissa known as ikats, also employ the yarn-resist method for both warp and weft threads. But the effect created is more diffuse, the motifs less precisely etched than in the patola. Yet the overall pattern is boldly articulated as in the confident strokes of a brush. Both tasar and mulberry silks are used in the weaving of Orissan silk ikats. Their col-

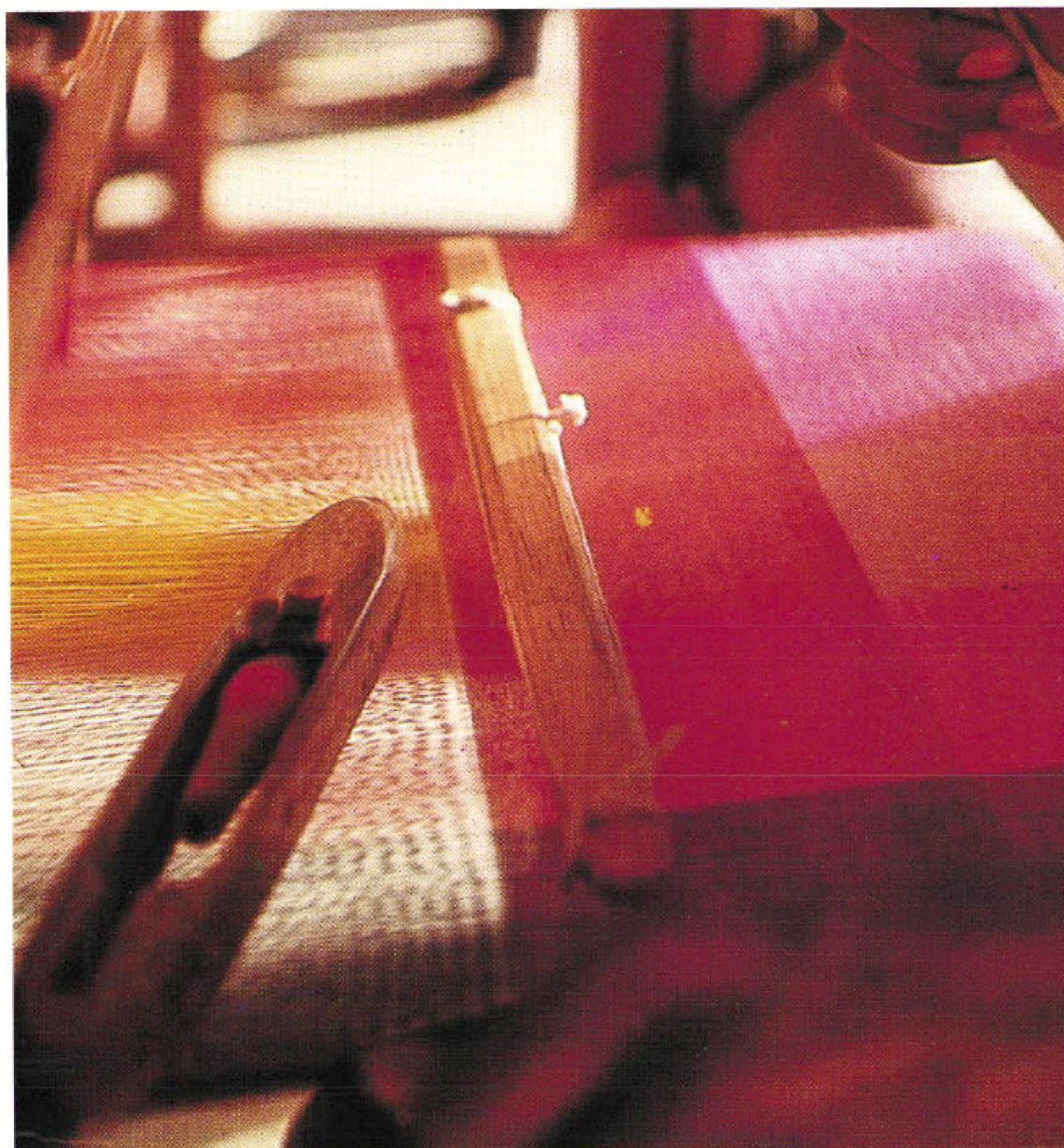


ours range from the rich traditional combinations of red and black, deep purple and green to the softer shades preferred by Western taste. Orissa ikats are magnificent as saris with intricately woven borders of fish and conch designs and ornamental pal-laus. They are also available as yardage that is perfect for dresses or as furnishing material.

The Brilliance of Bandhej

Perhaps the most widely known tie-and-dye fabrics of India are the bandhej or bandhnis of Gujarat and

Rajasthan. Unlike the ikat, where the tie-and-dye—process precedes weaving, in Bandhni the finely woven fabric is knotted tightly with thread in a pattern of pin-point dots and dyed repeatedly to achieve a distinctive design. The saris, odhnis and pagris (turbans) of these regions are a medley of brilliant colours. But the more sober black and Indian red patterning of the bandhni from Kutch is unmatched for the finesse of the minutely tied knots, the magnificence of the colours and the perfect

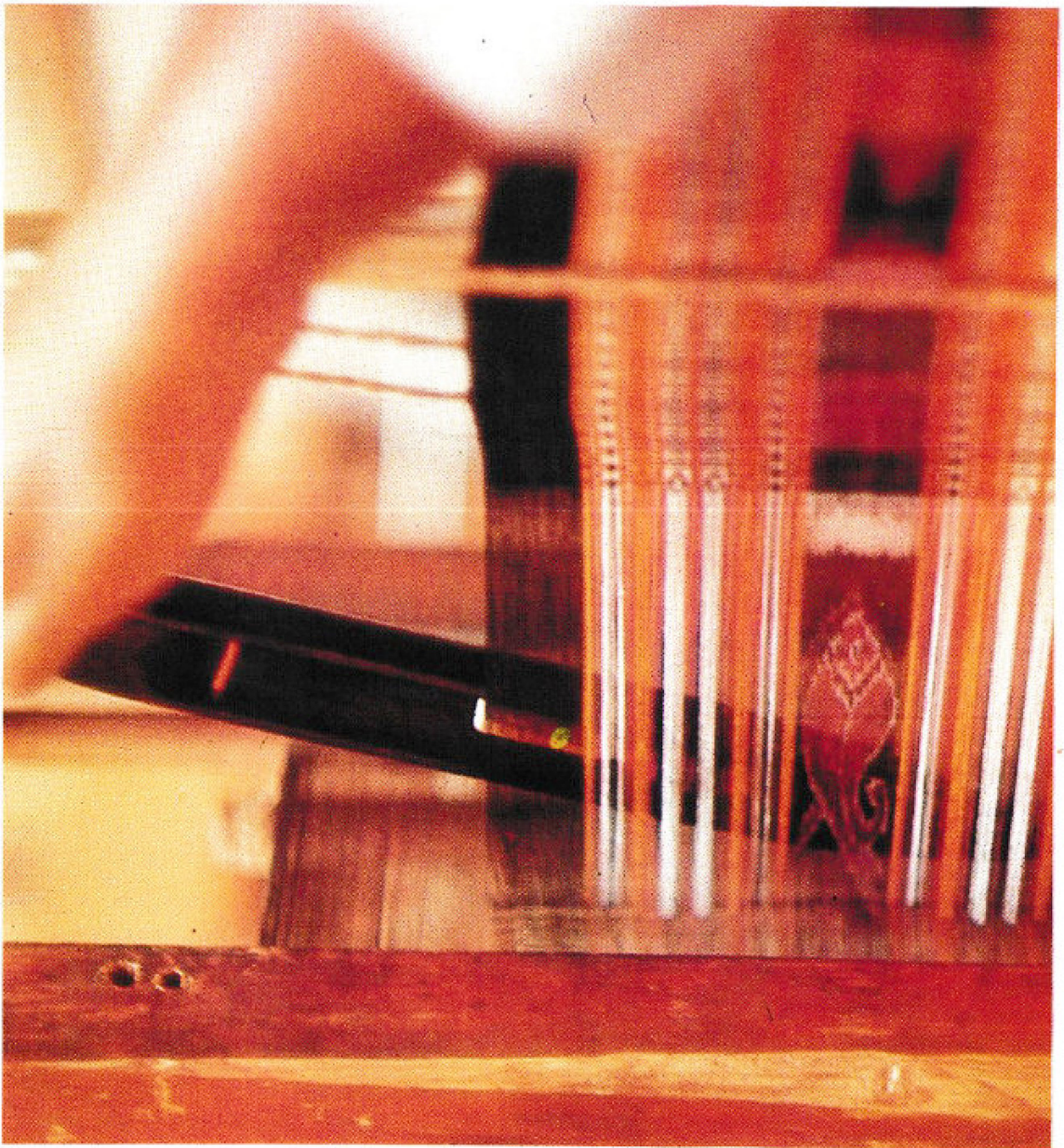


balance of the designs.

The joy of buying a bandhni sari or scarf from a traditional shop is that the tightly knotted piece of finished fabric is untied in front of the customer and stretched out to reveal the magical beauty of its unique design.

Mashru a Medley of Cotton and Silk

Mashru is a striped satin weave with a silk warp and a cotton weft. The origins of mashru are traced to

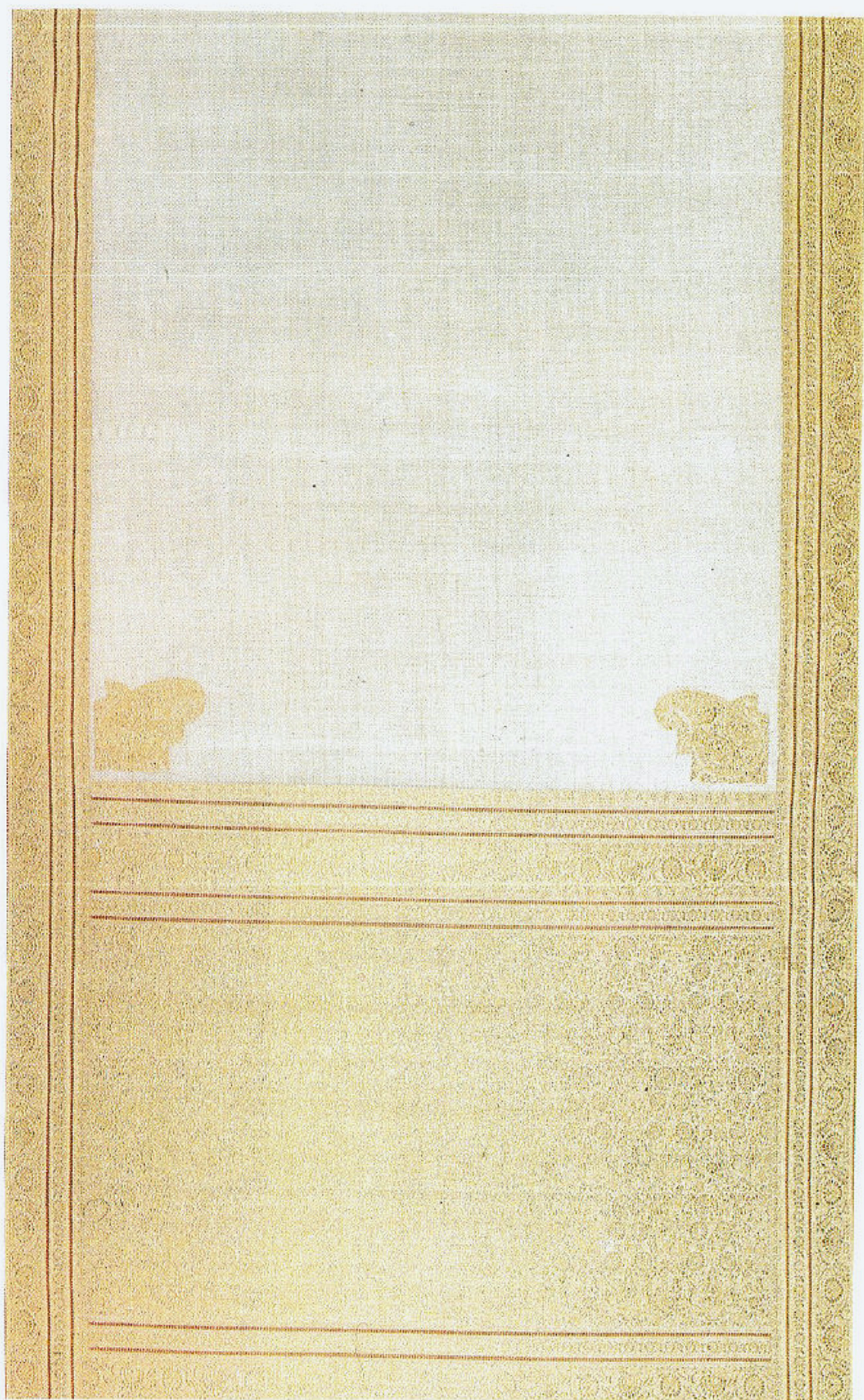




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Designers of international repute like Pierre Cardin of France, Carol Horn of the USA and Zandra Rhodes of Britain, have been inspired by India's spectacular silks to design 'Indian Collections' of fashion garments that are as expressive of their style and originality as the fabrics themselves.

Today, no less than in the age of the silk weavers of Mandasor, Indian silk is the most beautiful and refined fabric. And a symbol of the versatility, and creativity of a living craft.



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A copper coin of the Yaudheyas Circa 200BC symbolising Ahimsa
"Not to injure any living being"

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